

May 1971

Thomas Linacre: Humanist, Physician, Priest

Fred M. Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Taylor, Fred M. (1971) "Thomas Linacre: Humanist, Physician, Priest," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 38 : No. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol38/iss2/3>



THOMAS LINACRE* Humanist, Physician, Priest

Fred M. Taylor, M.D.

It is in life as it is in ways, the shortest way is commonly the foulest, and surely the fairer way is not much about.

Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*,
Book II. Chap. 23,
pp. 45, 1605

Part I

History is made up of extraordinary events that involve mankind. It is not just a record of dates and names entombed as words on printed pages; it is the story of the rise and fall of man's deeds and ideals, and the hibernation and rebirth of his intellectual, social and moral spirit. For most of us any view of history is superficial and short-sided, because time, as Maritain puts it, is linear, not cyclical.¹ Furthermore, historical periods are seldom marked by well-defined beginnings and endings, indeed

they often may be ever-beginning and ever-ending. In point of time the Renaissance although it reached its full being in Italy in the 16th century, was a period not of a few decades but of centuries — and each century is made up of 100 years. Its genesis was marked not by the sudden deployment of a new spirit of thought and culture and art, but however curious now, by the development of a new economy, a new way of credit, which over a period of years would serve to expand trade, develop international commerce and make it possible for powerful princes and rulers, lay and ecclesiastical alike, to accumulate enormous wealth. Thus when the circumstances were right, the wealth of Italian financiers and merchants, despot or not, made the Renaissance possi-

ble. Their patronage, however, made it a reality.

The Italian Renaissance represented the rebirth of man's intellectual, artistic, and scientific spirit in all its glory and evil. It spread along lines of trade, and attracted scholars from all Western Europe. Although a few English scholars went abroad to Italy to capture first-hand the spirit of the intellectual past, the effects of the Italian intellectual and cultural movement in England were virtually piecemeal and ever so slow in coming about.

But in the 15th and 16th centuries there emerged men who would develop in England not only the spirit but the essential character of the new intellectual and scientific movement. There emerged an intellectual triumvirate — Erasmus, Linacre, and More, a group of erudite men with the capacity not only to know and understand and to revive and protest, but also to represent all that was possibly best in terms of their contemporary life. Each of the triumvirate was a man of genius and, however suspect at times, deeply Christian. Each understood the grim problems of his time, and the need for their reform. But each was to witness (because conditions for reform by reason, understanding and charity did not exist), the destruction of their efforts and the iconoclasm of all their hopes for mankind's peace and unity. Thus each played a special role in the Renaissance and participated, either directly or indirectly, in events concerned

with the Reformation. *Thomas More*: distinguished statesman, martyred saint of the Renaissance, and author of that "infinitely wise — infinitely foolish satire, *Utopia*";² *Thomas Linacre*: brilliant humanist, Royal physician, and priest; and *Desiderius Erasmus*: non-monastic monk, intellectual spearhead of the Renaissance in England, and author of *Moriae Encomium* (Praise of Folly), a sharp satirical denunciation of the wickedness and folly of the time.³

In *Praise of Folly* — dedicated in 1511 to More — Erasmus singled out the scholarly Linacre, and noted in good-natured banter the many-sided endeavors that would establish Linacre as the "model for all times in literature."⁴

I knew an old Sophister that was a Grecian, a Latinist, a mathematician, a philosopher, a physician, and all to the greatest perfection, who after three score years of experience in the world had spent the last twenty of them only in drudging to conquer the criticisms of grammar, and made it the chief part of his prayers that his life might be so long spared till he had learned how rightly to distinguish betwixt the eight parts of speech, which no grammarian whether Greek or Latin had yet accurately done.⁵

Nearly 400 years later Sir William Osler, himself a Linacrean-like person, was to say:

"Linacre, the type of literary physician, must ever hold a unique place in the annals of our profession. To him was due in great measure the revival of Greek thought in the sixteenth century in England. . . . He was possessed from his youth till his death by the enthusiasm of learning. . . . He was an idealist devoted to objects which the world thought of little use. . . . He raised our profession above the level of business. . . ."

*Adapted from an address before The Osler Society, Baylor University College of Medicine, The Texas Medical Center, January 6, 1961.

Reprinted from *Linacre Quarterly* Nov. 1962, 29:176-183.

Then, in 1932 The Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, upon the suggestion of Dr. James J. Walsh, in special esteem and admiration of Thomas Linacre — humanist, physician, and priest — chose to name its official publication, "A Journal of the Philosophy and Ethics of Medical Practice," THE LINACRE QUARTERLY.⁷ Now, three decades later, the Federation, as well as students of Renaissance medicine, note a significant occasion — the quincentenary of Linacre's birth. Therefore, I should like — in full awareness of my limitations to depict the extraordinary event of that period in history, and thus of a certain nonsense in the portrayal of mere generalities 500 years later — to speak on Thomas Linacre, and relate not only some of his life, but something about his close friends.

THE OXFORD SCENE

Linacre was born in Canterbury, England, either in 1460 or 1461, his genealogy extending to the family of Linacre-hall near Chesterfield in Derbyshire.⁸ He was a studious, shy boy and at seven was entered in the lay monastery school of Christ Church in Canterbury. The headmaster and Prior was the eminent William de Selling,⁹ a scholarly Augustinian monk who had studied at Oxford University and become a Fellow of All Souls College, but because of a com-

elling interest in the way of Greek thought and tradition, and in ancient classics, he also studied Greek in Italy with Angelo Poliziano (Poliziano), the great master of Greek and the Florentine poet. Selling was one of England's first Greek scholars,⁹ and as headmaster at Christ Church school doubtless influenced not only the budding Renaissance of new learning in England but also the intellectual and literary life of Linacre, in whom he had shown a strong personal interest.

In his youth Linacre became noted for his bright intellectual capacity and remarkable ability to understand matters quickly and clearly. In 1480 he entered Oxford and took the usual curriculum of scholastic studies fashionable for the times. Although Linacre was apparently happy at Oxford, scholastic studies no longer reflected the spirit and manner of the scholasticism of its chief architect, Thomas Aquinas. As a matter of fact the scholasticism of Thomistic thinking, a kind of merger of philosophy and logic with theology, once the academic achievement of the age, no longer prevailed. Instead, something was strangely wrong. Both scholasticism and much of higher education had lost their vitality and declined to a kind of monotonous learning which had lost contact with the times. And too, innumerable persons could neither read nor write. The printing press had been invented in 1450, but the practice of written communication and the use of academic texts were still a novelty.

Thomas More, later a pupil of Linacre's, said of the scholastic studies, as a consequence of their decay: they are "about as useful as trying to milk a he-goat into a sieve."¹⁰ One of Linacre's disgruntled contemporaries described the emptiness of Oxford's curriculum:

... the schools were much frequented with quirks and sophistry. All things, whether taught or written, seemed to be trite and inane. No pleasant streams of humanity or mythology were gliding among us; and the Greek language, from whence the greater part of knowledge is derived, was at a very low ebb or in a manner forgotten.¹¹

Thus, there emerged in England not mere yearning but a desperate need for reform in education, a reform which would reinstate the spirit of creative and critical thinking in language and literature and in philosophy, history and theology, and bring about thereby a reconciliation of the objectivity of ancient Greece and Rome and the teaching of Christian philosophy. This was a task cut out for the humanist, and one of the first to appear on the Oxford scene was Cornelio Vitelli, an Italian scholar.¹² Vitelli, along with Selling, was one of the first educators since the early Middle Ages to reintroduce Greek in England, and to arouse intellectual consciences to the need for a new academic spirit. The beginning of humanistic learning was praiseworthy, but humanism in England hardly was real. Opposition was waged at Oxford to Vitelli's introduction of Greek, and new secular interests with libertine moral standards and pagan spirits, themselves speedily fatal

to real humanism, were everywhere. Indeed, mere social and moral reform, let alone intellectual reform, would be ever so delayed in their arrival on the English scene and overtake the learned ignorance of the time.

Throughout his life Linacre, regardless of reason, and however motivated, sought adventure in knowing and in doing a task well. Indeed this quest would save Linacre from much of the useless and negative features of scholasticism and make him a leader of the new intellectual spirit. With Linacre this spirit started at Canterbury with Selling and at Oxford with the study of Greek with Vitelli and the rediscovery and cultivation of the neglected classics of Aristotle and Galen. In 1484, approximately one year after the birth of Martin Luther, Linacre was elected a Fellow of All Souls College.⁸ Among the erudite notables emerging at the time at Oxford were Grocyn, Latimer, and Colet. With Linacre they would be christened the "Oxford Reformers,"¹³ and later, as a devoted circle of humanists in London, along with Thomas More, would gain the name, the "London Reformers."¹⁴ But despite the practical exigencies of the times Linacre would himself become a close friend of the great scholars of Europe and one of the first Oxford humanists to affirm in England not only the value of ancient literature but to exalt the classical idea that an intellectual and objective attitude is the foundation of both learning and useful progress.

RENAISSANCE CITIES

Henry VII, the first Tudor King, while embedded in the pressures to ameliorate existing medieval social and cultural conditions, was a man with a shrewd eye not only for political opportunity but also for successful precedent. Thus, however timely his imbuelement with the growing Renaissance movement, he was one of the first to maintain permanent English envoys abroad. In 1487 Henry VII sent William Selling, Linacre's friend and former headmaster at Canterbury, to Rome as an envoy to Pope Innocent VIII.¹⁴ Linacre accompanied Selling on his mission. Linacre, however, "in the belief that Italy was the nursing mother of men of genius,"⁹ and apparently entrusted to the care of Selling's old friend. Politian,¹⁴ remained in Italy and studied in the cities flourishing with the full force of the Renaissance way. Linacre became one of the first Englishmen not only to master Greek and to understand the original manuscripts of both Aristotle and Galen, but also to put the study and translations of the manuscripts of Greek philosophy and medicine on a scholarly basis.¹⁵

The cradle of the Italian Renaissance was Florence, not only in all its glory and wanton self-indulgence but in all its wealth and boundless individualism: Lorenzo "The Magnificent," powerful banker-prince of the patrician family of Medici, befriender and patron of the arts and culture; Leonardo da Vinci, the Renaissance's most versatile gen-

ius — he would finish the Last Supper in 1497; Raphael and Michelangelo, and Botticelli, famed Florentine painter, champion of the cause of the martyred Dominican reformer, Savonarola.

"Not since the days of Periclean Greece had there been such an intense striving for perfection, such joyous eagerness to express beauty and to penetrate the mysteries of nature by rational inquiry and scientific experimentation."¹⁶ But Linacre also lived in these astonishing times: Pope Innocent VIII (1484-1492) was elected simoniacally in 1484, and the notorious Pope Alexander VI would reign from 1492 to 1503.¹⁷ Innocent VIII was the first Pope, for instance, to acknowledge natural children born to him in pre-papal years, and the first Pope, in diplomatic maneuvers, to marry a son to a daughter of Lorenzo Medici, in order to seal for years to come a pact of peace with the Medicis, hitherto strongly anti-papal.¹⁸

In Florence, Linacre studied Greek with Politian, one of the best masters, also tutor of the young Medici princes, Piero and Giovanni. Through Politian, Linacre met Lorenzo de Medici and developed friendships with those making up the intellectual Medici court — a refreshing contrast to the semi-monastic life and scholastic drudgery at Oxford! Linacre became a close companion of Giovanni Medici, himself a fourth generation Medici scholar, who at the age of thirteen had become a Cardinal of the Church. Giovanni, in fact, was

destined to be the future Pope Leo X (1513-1521)¹⁸ to whom Linacre would dedicate Greek translations, and Erasmus would dedicate one of the great works of his life, a Greek *New Testament*, *Zeitgeist!*

After leaving Florence, Linacre pursued his studies in Rome where he met apostolic secretaries, and examined and studied critically the priceless manuscripts of the Vatican libraries.¹⁹ In 1493, through reading a manuscript of Plato in the Vatican library, he formed a lasting acquaintance with another great scholar, Hermolous Barbarus. From Barbarus, who had undertaken the gigantic task of translating into Latin the works of Aristotle, Linacre acquired further interest in the study of the Greek manuscripts of Aristotle and of Dioscorides and Pliny.²⁰

In Venice, the courtesan city of the Renaissance, Linacre lived with Aldus Manutius Romanus, one of the greatest printers and editors of the times.¹² Romanus, innovator of type, developer of *italics*, and founder of the New Academy of Hellenists, published some of the first editions of the new Latin translations of Greek works, including a five volume edition of Aristotle's works which Linacre probably helped translate and edit.²¹ Romanus himself published one of Linacre's first translations, *Proclus' de Sphaera* (1499), and in its dedication, paying tribute to Linacre, stated that Linacre had translated "with elegance and learning."⁹ Linacre would, in fact, become famous for his accurate and critical trans-

lations of Galen — Galen the Great, surgeon to the gladiatorial amphitheaters and personal physician to Marcus Aurelius, who innumerable years before Osler had as his motto, *Aequanimitas*.²²

At Padua, Linacre undertook the study of medicine at the University. Not only one of the chief centers of Italian humanism, and one of the few Italian schools outside papal domination, Padua — "Fair Padua, Nursery of Arts,"²³ as Shakespeare calls her — had attracted students from all over Europe and become one of the distinguished schools of Renaissance medicine. Although the number of years Linacre spent in medical education at Padua is not known — and the year of his degree being even more uncertain²⁴ — the University bestowed on Linacre, as *Thomas Anglicus*, the degree Doctor of Medicine.¹² Since it was the academic custom then to recognize honors and special degrees granted students by foreign schools, Oxford University, apparently after Linacre's return to England, also bestowed on him the degree Doctor of Medicine.²⁰

ARISTOCRACY OF INTELLECT

Although the lives of More and Erasmus are portrayed carefully in fascinating accounts, only scant details about Linacre are really known. But insofar as we know there was neither intrigue nor plot associated with his name. He was known to be shy, modest, and indifferent to honors. Nonetheless, he was liked and respected by all

men. Unmarried, he supposedly led a celibate life.²⁵ He kept few social ties, yet obviously moved in high influential circles. But he also was known to show a "remarkable kindness to young students in his profession; and those whom he found distinguished for ingenuity, modesty, learning good manners, or a desire to excel, he assisted with his advice, his interest and his purse."²⁶

Erasmus once said of Linacre: he was "... a man not only of exact but even of severe judgment."²⁷ Scholars such as Linacre are members of an elite of human beings that are aristocratic in temper. Their aristocracy, however, is of the intellect.²⁸ Furthermore, scholars like Linacre and Grocyn, are noted for their slowness to write and publish, writing however "with care, and with repeated correction." Virtually no editor today would quarrel with Grocyn's dictum that "it is better to abstain entirely from composition than to write badly or imperfectly."²⁹

Greek, it must be stressed again, was one of the most important keys to the greatest literature of the past, not only in science but in philosophy and theology. Linacre himself emphasized how Greek as an original language would be of value even to the future of medicine:

... Nothing would contribute more to its success than rendering his profession familiar with Galen by a Latin version of his works, which were then scarcely known in the language in which they were composed.³⁰

Linacre not only learned Greek, he mastered it; and in the "*lingua franca* of the learned,"³¹ translated it to Latin with a style itself pure and clear. Thus, when he left Italy and returned to

England in 1499 he was as a recognized authority in the Greek language, and a literary scholar. Enroute to England "while crossing the Alps at the Great St. Bernard Pass, he was sentimentally moved," it is said, "on bidding farewell to Italy, to build a rough altar of stone dedicated to the land of his studies as *Sancta Mater studiorum*."³² Linacre taught Greek at Oxford upon his return, and devoted himself also to translating and teaching Greek manuscripts of science and medicine, lecturing on the scientific works of Aristotle but writing chiefly on the works of Galen.³² He would become pre-eminent not as a doctor of medicine but as a classic scholar, and clear the way for the scientific methods of Harvey and thereby gain, whether justified or not, the title of the Intellectual Grandfather of Harvey.³³

JOVIAL SCHOLARS: ERASMUS AND MORE

In 1499, approximately five years after the death of William Selling, Erasmus of Rotterdam,³⁴ a lonely, restless man of formidable intellectual capacity, visited England, and under the influence of John Colet at Oxford, and Thomas More in London, later found patronage and a chance for scholarship and happiness. He became a pupil of Linacre's, and one of his closest friends, indeed one of his patients. Erasmus, like Linacre's first headmaster and tutor, was an Augustinian monk with no flair, however, for monastic life. Like Linacre, however, he spent considerable years studying in Italy. A man of exquisite literary gifts,

hating ignorance and immorality, Erasmus was to become the intellectual spearhead of the Renaissance in England, and struggle intensely for over a quarter of a century with the prevailing bigotries of mankind.

"Greek is almost too much for me," Erasmus wrote in his restless efforts to master it. "I have no time, I have nothing with which to buy books or pay a teacher. And amidst all this trouble, I can scarcely get the wherewithal to sustain life. That is what it is to be a scholar."³⁵

However simple Erasmus described his wants, he loved life and delicate living. "A skin of Greek wine or a cask of burgundy," he wrote, "would save me from the odious necessity of drinking English beer."³⁶ Nor could he eat, nor even bear the smell of fish. In squeamish satire he said: "His heart was Catholic, but his stomach was Lutheran."³⁷

Although he held royal courts "in abomination, as presenting nothing but splendid misery and an affected state of happiness,"³⁸ he praised the charms of English womanhood in a delightfully amusing account:

... there is a custom which cannot be sufficiently praised. Wherever you go, you are received with kisses from everybody; when you leave you are dismissed with kisses. You go back, and your kisses are returned to you. People arrive: kisses; they depart: kisses; wherever people foregather, there are lots of kisses; in fact, whatever way you turn, everything is full of kisses.³⁹

A man of unusual abilities and a scholar of world-wide fame, Erasmus not only valued teachers but furthermore, maintained that in order to educate children adequately their education should be started early. But he also

pressed the idea and the idea is still being pressed — that it is the responsible business of both Church and state to provide children a proper number of adequately qualified teachers. Although Erasmus thought that Linacre was one of few men really capable of translating and teaching Greek, he noted whimsically that his Greek was better than his medicine.⁴⁰ In a beautifully rendered account Erasmus once wrote:

When I hear my Colet I seem to be listening to Plato himself. In Grocyn, who does not wonder at that perfect compass of all knowledge? What is more acute, more profound, more keen than the judgment of Linacre? What did nature ever create milder, sweeter, or happier than the genius of Thomas More?⁴¹

Thomas More also studied Greek under Linacre at Oxford, and while studying law in London attended his course on Aristotle's scientific work, *Meteorologica*.⁴¹ But no teacher ever had such jovial students as Erasmus and More. In *Utopia*, however wise in part his satirical masterpiece, More states that a "physician must be foolish, if he can only cure a patient of one disease by giving him another; and that likewise a king, who amends the life of his subjects only by confiscation, shows that he knows not how to rule free men."⁴² More was not only the master of wit and irony and the eloquent poet, he would become the great statesman and Lord Chancellor of King Henry VIII. About 1504, More wrote (probably in a letter to Colet, who at that time was an ambassador to Rome): "I pass my time with Grocyn, who is as you know, in your absence, the guide of my life, and with Linacre, the guide of my studies."⁴³ (*Part II, Aug. '71 L.Q.*)